

Appropriations Committee  
Deficiency Hearing  
March 25, 2014

Testimony of James Gill, Chief Medical Examiner,  
Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

Good morning, Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Miner and distinguished members of the appropriations committee. I am James Gill, Chief Medical for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Thank you for your support of our office and for giving me the opportunity to describe our current financial status. We have a projected deficiency of \$100,000 (agency budget \$5,399,803, 1.9%). I would like briefly to explain the main cause of this shortfall and then answer any questions.

When I started as the Chief Medical Examiner at the end of July 2013, I found a toxicology lab in crisis. There was an extreme backlog with over 850 pending cases going back to January. The average turn-around-time was 139 days (50% of cases done in 139 days while the standard is 90% done in 60 days). This resulted in death certificates that could not be finalized for several months. Without a final cause of death, families are deprived of emotional closure as well as bear an economic burden because payments of insurance benefits will not be issued without the final death certificate. This delay also affects police departments investigating deaths and funeral homes. Weekly, our office would receive numerous calls from families and government officials asking about the pending results.

This toxicology backlog was due to insufficient staff and equipment to keep up with the testing and the lack of a director to do a final review to finish the case or determine if additional testing was needed. Due to staffing shortages, certain confirmatory testing (including heroin) needed to be sent to a private lab. In many instances, this confirmatory testing cost more than if the outside lab did the entire testing from the start.

In September, all new cases were sent to a private lab for toxicology testing and we temporarily re-hired our retired toxicology director. In the next three months, we cleared the backlog and the new cases that were being sent out to a private lab had an average turn-around-time of 9 days. With the outside lab, 100% of testing is done within 30 days. Unlike CSI on television that can do testing in one day, the reality is that it takes several days and sometimes weeks depending upon what is detected.

Clearing this backlog resulted in the toxicology costs for several hundred of these fiscal-year-2013 cases to be shifted to 2014. The confirmatory testing alone cost approximately \$37,000 and the re-hiring of the director cost \$9,280. It should be noted that we also have had a 40% increase in drug-related deaths. This increase results in increased toxicology testing.

We have continued to purchase the toxicology services, as it would have required significant capital investments to update the lab, and expect to recognize further cost savings as the expenses of operating our lab are phased out. By doing so, we expect to spend less than half of what it costs to operate our own toxicology lab, and with increased efficiency, cost savings, and enhanced quality. In accordance with the state's agreements with its unionized workforce, any affected toxicology staff will be placed in other lab settings within the state, primarily at the State Police lab in Meriden. I should note that from our cremation investigations, our office brings in over \$2,000,000 each year to the State's general fund.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee on our projected deficiency. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.